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ABSTRACT

Teacher Corps experience in meeting Corps objectives in rural sites provides a rich source of information about rural education. Collaboration exists between university faculty and rural school staff despite distances involved and sharp increases in transportation costs, but development of on-site facilitators is critical to making collaboration work. College scholarships and low-interest loans offered to young local people who agree to return as teachers in local schools can alleviate the problem of attracting and keeping quality staff. Weekly conference call sessions and use of videotape are possible solutions to problems which distance creates for the delivery of supportive inservice training. Utilization of on-site facilitators, combined with an orientation toward more individualized and staff-based inservice, can greatly improve a small district's staff development efforts. A consistent finding, relevant to the improved school climate objective, is that morale of staff, students, and community residents is generally high in rural areas. Progress has been mixed with regard to Teacher Corps objectives focusing on multicultural education and needs of exceptional students. Establishment of an office or center for rural education seems essential to meeting objectives of institutionalization, demonstration, and dissemination. A land grant university would be an ideal location for this. (CH)

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Reports from the Field: Teacher Corps in Rural Sites

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Teacher Corps is a five year federal demonstration program focused on strengthening the educational opportunities for young people in communities with significant numbers of low-income families. Its structure is collaborative, requiring a university to join with a local community and school system to improve the staff development system, in part field- and community-based, to plan, develop, implement and disseminate improvements in the way in which teachers are trained and retrained to work with less advantaged students. Its focus is also on improving school climate, including an infusion of content and techniques suited to the needs of students who represent multiculturally diverse backgrounds as well as those who have special needs. Each project has a funding pattern that is dynamic and locally determined, beginning modestly ($150,000) with a planning year, peaking in years two and three with implementation ($275,000; $225,000), and, then, finishing with a fourth year focus on institutionalization ($200,000) and a fifth year on demonstration and dissemination ($100,000).

In all there are over 120 projects nationally, at least one in every state, and 51 in rural sites. Client populations range from poor whites in Appalachia to poor Blacks in the South, from Native Americans on reservations throughout the West to Hispanics in the Southwest, from Eskimos in Alaska to native populations on islands in the Pacific. I myself represent a Project at Colorado State University involving the small community of Fort Lupton, a traditionally agricultural economy but with large numbers of Hispanics in part descendent from migrant laborers who settled in the area.

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Paper presented at the April 1981 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, California.

As such Teacher Corps represents a tremendously rich body of information about rural education and I will attempt to give you a brief sketch of what we're finding.

First, collaboration or shared decision-making among university, school and community representatives. Whenever you discuss rural education, one factor that inevitably affects the quality of interaction possible is the distance that separates small and isolated communities from the education faculty at colleges and universities. With the sharp increases in transportation costs experienced over the past few years, rural projects have faced ever greater challenges in meeting this program objective. Yet, the collaboration proceeds, and it has been a healthy process as both university faculty and rural school staff have been forced to venture out from their traditional and safe jurisdictions into those of others.

Some issues affecting collaboration persist, however. Initially, there was considerable evidence of a general suspiciousness about university outsiders. Two factors that have helped to dissipate some of that have been time (five year funding cycle) and continuity and sensitivity in project leadership. Yet, the feelings persist; why do local tax monies have to be sent to Washington and returned in the nature of a federal program with the resulting syphoning off of funds for administrative costs. To counteract this, university faculty have had to learn to operate more as facilitators and less as experts, to be much more low-keyed in their dealings with school and/or community representatives. Jargon and "impressive" vocabularies must be simplified. Efforts have been made to meet as much as possible on site or on neutral turf. Absolutely essential, however, is the need to find competent and trusted "bridge" people, school and community representatives who can hold their own with university and Washington types. Developing on-site coordinators or facilitators may well be the most critical element in making collaboration work.

Second, staff development. Since rural communities have neither the tax base nor the social opportunities nor the privacy of more populated areas, attracting and keeping quality staff is a major problem. And solutions will not come easily. Should the courts or legislatures choose to equalize per capita expenditures across school districts, rural schools will stand to benefit. However, it is unlikely this will happen. A strategy with more immediate potential would involve the development of field-based recruitment efforts for university teacher training. With the assistance of local business and agricultural interests, scholarships and low-interest loans could be assembled and offered to young people in the region who would be willing to return from college as teachers in the local schools. Not only could a steady supply of teachers interested in and familiar with rural life be developed but opportunities for internships in the local schools could be established, tremendously augmenting and enriching teacher training at the university.

Another concern is delivering the supportive inservice that can either help develop young and inexperienced staff or help keep veteran staff involved and enthused about their jobs. Again, the barrier of distance is a major obstacle. Some projects have experimented with telecommunications. The most popular is a version of the telephone conference hook-up. When combined with one or more on site visits by the faculty member, and the use of someone serving as facilitator on site, weekly conference call sessions seem to be reasonable alternatives to the prohibitive costs both in dollars and effort required to bridge the distance otherwise. At least one project has been involved with the purchase of an electronic blackboard which is used to augment the telephone conference hook-up.

Various usages of videotape also offer possible solutions. For one, instructional modules can include videotapes and be sent to rural schools via the mails. These can be designed to stand alone as self-study units or to involve

some amount of university-school interaction. Secondly, entire courses can be videotaped as they proceed on campus and those tapes sent out to rural sites. Colorado State University's engineering program has had a similar program with regional industry for many years. The advantages are those of university offerings by regular faculty augmented by teleconference interactions via telephone. The disadvantages are those of the passive viewer unable to ask questions on the spot and the deadening qualities of unedited television generally. Finally, with the growing utilization of cable television in rural areas tremendous potential exists for the delivery of inservice via channels dedicated to public use.

Two aspects of staff development in rural sites that several Teacher Corps projects seem to have developed in parallel are programs that are site- and staff-based. As mentioned above various projects are utilizing on site facilitators to bridge the distance barrier. Combine this with an orientation toward more individualized and staff-based inservice and you have a model that could greatly improve any small district's staff development efforts. In Colorado we have used both site-based and campus-based faculty to offer independent study on site. We have also utilized local staff whenever possible to augment inservice offerings. To meet interests that we could not we instituted a tuition subsidy program as an incentive for staff to enroll in classes at other campuses. Finally, to meet staff needs that were unrelated to formal credit offerings, an extensive mini- and summer-grant program has been funded through Teacher Corps, allowing individual staff members or teams to pursue activities that would enrich their teaching. These are set up on an experimental basis with an obligation by the school district to consider assuming the costs of programs that were especially successful.

Third, school climate. Efforts to improve school climate emerged from the Kettering Foundation's research which speaks to various program, process and material determinants that appear to be related to high morale among staff, students and community residents.[1] That sense of satisfaction is in turn related to higher productivity (achievement, motivation). These determinants include the following:

Program Determinants

- Opportunities for Active Learning
- Individualized Performance
- Expectations
- Varied Learning Environments
- Flexible Curriculum and Extracurricular Activities
- Support and Structure Appropriate to Learner's Maturity
- Rules Cooperatively Determined
- Varied Reward Systems

Process Determinants

- Problem-solving Ability
- Continuous Improvement of School Goals
- Identifying and Working with Conflicts
- Effective Communications
- Involvement in Decision Making
- Autonomy with Accountability
- Effective Teaching-Learning Strategies
- Ability to Plan for the Future

Material Determinants

- Adequate Resources
- Supportive and Efficient Logistical System
- Suitability of School Plant

This improved school climate objective has proven to reveal some interesting facets about rural schools. Perhaps most importantly is the consistent finding that the morale of staff, students and community residents is generally high in rural schools. Although typically only modest in its expectations for its students, the rural school rarely has that angry and tense edge that inner city schools so often seem to have. Moreover, rural schools also appear to reflect

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[1] (CFK Ltd.) and climate.

a climate of confidence and hope in the nation, its values, its traditions and its practices. Unlike the legions of alienated urban and even suburban students, either too angry or too cool or too hopped up to participate in the learning process, rural students generally come to school with a healthy respect for teachers and the importance of schools. Just consider the role that the rural school plays in the lifeblood of any small community, from physical centerpiece to social, athletic and even political hub. As a consequence efforts intended to improve the client of the rural school typically start with a tremendous foundation of good will and positive community consensus already in place.

One promising technique that has been tried in rural schools and is now being developed as a contract service is the climate audit.[2] Extensively utilized by Dr. Eugene Howard (Colorado Department of Education) throughout the state this process brings a team of outside educators (school and university) to the site school for a full day of interviews with staff, students and parents about the strengths of that particular school with respect to the determinants that are related to a positive school climate (e.g., active learning, varied curriculum). Once completed the results are reported back to the site school staff and a task force structure established to recommend improvements.

Related Teacher Corps objectives to an improved school climate include those focused on education that is both multicultural as well as sensitive to the needs of exceptional students. In rural areas progress has been mixed. Because of the traditional and primarily conservative nature of most rural communities, changes in school curriculum or goals do not come quickly. Historical prejudices run deep. Yet, in communities that are as homogeneous as the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, tremendous changes have been made in the basic organization and

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[2] E. Howard and audit references including ASCD.

goal structure, moving the school at Little Wound out of the Bureau of Indian Affair's (BIA) control and into that of local tribe members, with an accompanying infusion of tribal heritage into the school's curriculum. And Teacher Corps was a part of that change.

In other projects, where there was an ethnic mixture, Teacher Corps came in with the stigma of being just another federal program for "them," for the Blacks or Browns, poor Indians or Whites. And it has not been easy to overcome that perception. Remember that Ronald Reagan attracted tremendous support from rural areas in the 1980 election in part by promising to get the federal government out of local affairs. Having evolved out of the social change momentum of the early 1960's, Teacher Corps has had an especially heavy cross to bear given the mood of rural America at the end of the 1970's. As a result, changes have been slow in several projects.

In addition to the expected resistance in rural areas to the pluralistic notions embodied in efforts aimed at a multicultural education, came some opposition to the exceptionality objective as well. Although much less volatile than the multicultural goal, resistance in this instance seems in part to be a fall-out from Public Law 94-142 requiring the mainstreaming of special needs students. In rural areas this has often meant significant add on costs as school buildings are retrofitted to accommodate one or two handicapped students. Again, it is charged, the federal government is imposing unreasonable regulations upon communities who not only have few if any handicapped students but also must dig deep to pay for the kinds of building alterations that are called for by law. Because Teacher Corps tends to be so visible in rural areas, it also tends to take the heat for other concerns about federal involvement.

Finally, institutionalization, demonstration and dissemination. These Teacher Corps objectives were written into the authorization legislation to force

serious attention onto potential successes and how they will be continued once federal funding ends. In rural areas there are advantages as well as disadvantages for accomplishing these objectives. On the plus side are the economies of scale, that rural schools involve limited numbers of staff and, therefore, are easier to move once some critical number has been convinced. On the negative side is the lack of traditional support for change or, rather, the inertia that exists in many rural communities concerning change.

One major effort under way at Colorado State University is intended to assist in facilitating needed changes. An Office for Rural Education has been established to serve as a channel for identifying needs of rural schools in Colorado, providing services on a cost-effective basis and participating in significant research efforts. Parallel to this effort will be an attempt to establish a national network through the auspices of the Rural Education Association.

An office or center for rural education seems to be an important first step and a university, especially a land grant university with its long established ties with agriculture, mining and extension work in rural areas, is an ideal place to pull together the various interest groups concerned with rural education and rural life generally. Presently at CSU, a needs assessment for rural school districts has been prepared for distribution and analysis. A major research effort focused on the alternative school calendar, specifically the four day school week, has been joined with the Colorado Department of Education. Various staff development activities have been developed and are now available on a contract basis, from specific workshop topics to external audits of school climate and the instructional process. Finally, communication and dissemination efforts in the form of journals (Small School Forum and the Rural Educator) and newsletters have been initiated. What seems essential in all of this is that someone needs to take the initiative to establish such a center or office and have the

administrative support to manage it. Other than that it can serve as a conduit for providing contracted services to rural schools. The initial response in Colorado and other states that have tried this has been very encouraging. Teacher Corps has provided us with the front or seed money to get it all started.

All in all, the Teacher Corps experience in rural sites represents a tremendously rich body of information and experience. This paper is a first attempt at collecting and synthesizing some of that material.

Notes & References

1. The most succienct and widely used reference on school climate is the Phi Delta Kappan publication, School Climate Improvement: A Challenge to the School Administrator, CFK Ltd. Editorial Staff, Robert S. Fox, Chairman, Bloomington, Indiana, 1975, which in turn was built upon an earlier publication by the C.F. Kettering Foundation (CFK Ltd.), also chaired by Robert S. Fox.
2. Eugene Howard has published several papers on the mini-audit and its use in identifying positive school climate determinants. An entire instructional package including audio-visual materials is available through the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), 225 North Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Howard has also recently published a book on improving school climate, School Discipline Desk Book, N.Y.: Parker, 1978.